

# *The Little Mermaid*

## Icon and Disneyfication

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AS AN ICON IN MASS CULTURE, the Little Mermaid has become the official image of Denmark in general, and of its capital, Copenhagen, in particular. Its iconicity is intimately tied to two sources: Edvard Eriksen's famous bronze statue erected on the Copenhagen waterfront in 1913 and Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale from 1837. The complexity of Andersen's fairytale, however, which lends the symbolic value to Eriksen's statue, has been largely ignored because the statue has taken on a life of its own. Historically, it belongs to the final phase of Danish classical sculpture, but it has also become the raw material of modernistic artistic expressions. In fact over the last forty years, the statue has moved toward two distinct representations: the completed statue by Eriksen viewed and revered by the millions of tourists who visit and photograph it and the ongoing fragmented and unfinished work, which has derived from the destruction of the former. This latter "work of art" in turn points to the modernity of which it and Denmark has become part.

The fragmentation started in 1961, when the statue had its hair painted red and was dressed up in a bra and panties. Two years later she was painted red again. In 1964, these prankish attacks were followed by an act of willful artistic vandalism when an unknown assailant sawed the head off the body. Later, Jørgen Nash, a situationist visual artist and author, claimed responsibility for removing the head and for making a deliberate assault on the Danish national symbol. Again, in the 1970s and '80s, the national symbol came under attack. In 1990, she lost half of her head, and in 1998, the entire head was again severed from her body. The final attack to date took place in 2003, when the mermaid

was blown off her stone, thrown into the water with injured knees and lips. After reconstructive surgery, she was placed back at "home" on her stone. Since 2008, the daily newspaper *Politiken* has offered a "Genetically Modified Mermaid" to its readers. It is a small porcelain copy of a large sculpture made by the great Danish sculptor Bjørn Nørgaard. In the comfort of their living rooms, the Danes can enjoy in miniature what can be seen in its original size in the Copenhagen harbor: a monstrosity intended by Nørgaard to function as a commentary on Eriksen's statue. Nørgaard's mermaid, with deep cuts into her hips, has been "genetically modified" in a biotech laboratory. The point is that so-called deconstructed and wounded nature has become a part of culture, not because it has been brought into the living rooms as a knick-knack, but because it is a continual modification of previous cultural representations. The article focuses on H.C. Andersen's fairytale



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and shows how the mermaid in the text can be seen as an icon, a saint-like representation, whose existence is articulated—as with her statuary life—in water, on land, and in the air.

### FOLK CULTURE AND MASS CULTURE

On its way to the sea, the Odense River still runs sluggishly through the city. The riverbed is not deep. Here in the cold water, Andersen's mother stood and washed clothes for the well-to-do. In 1855, he depicted this scene in "Hun duede ikke" ["She was Good for Nothing"], which tells of a mother with a heart of gold who dies from the cold and toil. Twenty years earlier, he placed the setting of another of his fairytales, "Little Claus and Big Claus," by the same river. Little Claus—the sharp and cunning proletarian—settles accounts with the powers that be and finally fools Big Claus such that he is drowned, in having been tempted by the fine sea cattle that are at the bottom of the river. Sea cattle belong in later Nordic folklore to the merpeople and were therefore associated with mermen and sea giants, who were believed to be the cause of accidents at sea—a magical element that was respected for the sake of fertility. Nordic folklore also describes bipartite bodies that were half woman and half fish. They are first mentioned in medieval folk ballads and later become part of the fabric of the legends of feudal traditional culture in which they were most often depicted as the friendly helpers of sailors.

Andersen's "Den lille Havfrue" [The Little Mermaid] was written in 1836–37 and first published on April 7, 1837. Although the author maintained that his work had no model, the tale nonetheless draws on the traditions of an older feudal oral folk culture. Folk ballads had earlier supplied Danish authors such as Johannes Evald with aspects of the mermaid theme, and Andersen himself had already utilized the topic as, for example, in "Agnete og Havmanden" ["Agnete and the Merman"] from 1833 in which the merman states that Agnete can only obtain an immortal soul through her love. "Den lille Havfrue" is also inspired by works of Andersen's contemporaries. Part of the plot is borrowed from B.S. Ingemann's *De Underjordiske* [The Creatures from the Underworld] (1817) while the mermaid's longing for an immortal soul and the transformation of her body into sea foam derives from a short narrative entitled *Undine* (1811) by the German author Friedrich de la



Motte Fouqué. Andersen's text, thus, contributes to the comprehensive reconstitution and remediation of the traditional culture of the romantic period.

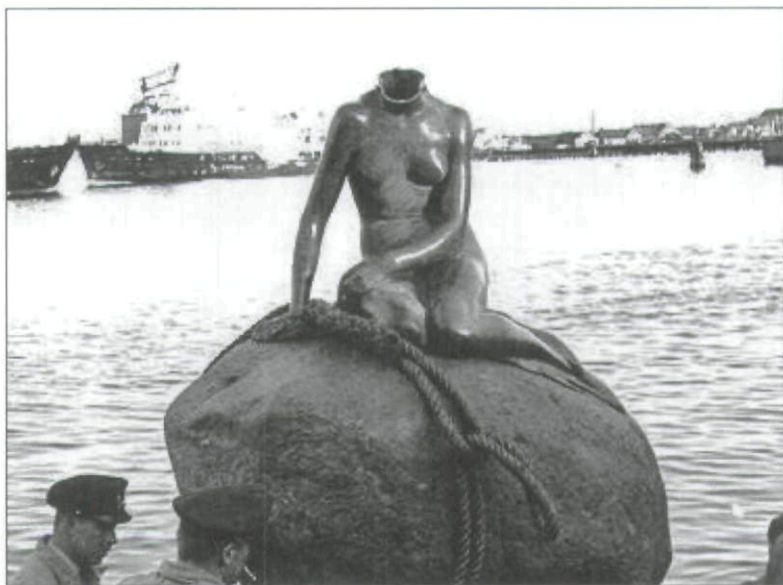
A complicated network unfolds in connection with the mermaid. Andersen, for example, draws on several different sources, and many other contemporary works on mermaids from his age that may have also served as a basis for the reconstitution and remediation of this figure by mass culture in more recent times. Such problems, though, are beyond the scope of this article, the premise of which is that this fairytale in particular exhibits qualities that changed the course of tradition and supplied modern industrial, popular, and mass culture with material. A more detailed discussion of these propositions will not be possible here, however, since I wish to concentrate instead on an analysis of the text and its remediation by Walt Disney, who has famously drawn on Andersen's fairytale and delivered it to movie theaters and VCR's in even the remotest parts of the globe. Although its meaning and understanding presuppose the original tale, it appears only in the form of reconstructions and repetitions—remediations that both give it meaning while taking it away.

The Disney film presents not only the text, but also the sculpture purchased in 1913 by the founder of Carlsberg Brewery, Carl Jacobsen, and placed at Langelinje in Copenhagen. The artist, Edvard Eriksen, rather innocently depicted the dancer Ellen Price on a maritime base and placed the figure on a flat stone near the pier. Eriksen was inspired by the French sculptor Henri Chapu's *Jeanne d'Arc* (1870), a replica of which was displayed in Copenhagen. Eriksen's mermaid is not simply a sculpture. At a diminutive height of 1.25 meters, it is a national icon undoubtedly associated with Andersen, but at the same time, it has become disassociated from the author and independently stands today both as a symbol of Denmark in general and of Copenhagen in particular. It as well serves as the springboard for remediations that are only remotely linked to Andersen although they play a significant role in today's folk culture, i.e. the tourist and culture industry. While Eriksen's mermaid longs wistfully or tragically for a love that cannot be realized, a steady stream of postcards and merchandise generally manages to portray her as little more than a reference to the first country to lift the criminal ban on pornographic pictures in 1969 or to the world-famous blonds in *Wonderful Copenhagen*.

One frequently sees examples of advertisements, pictures in the press, and newspaper articles that ascribe a sexual motive or activity to the mermaid that are altogether foreign to the works of both Andersen and Eriksen. One such example is the large billboard advertisements that were displayed throughout Rome a few years ago depicting a mermaid whose genital region was merged with half a banana whose peel was slit slightly upwards at the bottom. Evidently, this combination of one male and one female sexual attribute was intended to sell more banana yogurt. Two other stories in the Danish newspapers the day the report on this advertizing campaign was published also come to mind.<sup>1</sup> The first reports on the gay pride parade, "Danish Mermaid Pride," which was criticized on the streets for its march through Copenhagen by a lesbian group arguing that homosexuality should not be portrayed as something unique. The second is from Weeki Wachee, Florida, a water park that has fallen on hard times despite the fact that generations of young girls once fought to appear there dressed in a mermaid costume and submerged in a gigantic glass tank before half a million visitors each year. The job is tough since the girls are not only supposed to swim convincingly and with a smile as they flit about in the cold water with their Lycra tails, but also must be able to get oxygen from time to time from underwater breathing hoses designed for that purpose. They must also contend with the stray sea animals that occasionally find their way into the tank from the local river. Given a choice, the girls like the peaceful sea cows the best because they love to be scrubbed on the back while the tank is being cleaned. The pay for this job starts at \$6.50 an hour, and the entire set-up is managed by none other than the inimitable Ms. Anderson.

In 1964, another and more sophisticated meaning was attributed to the statue. Paradoxically, its status was underscored after it was defaced by a steady array of unknown vandals who sawed off the mermaid's head and carried it off. Pictures of the defaced statue were seen the world over, and the event marked the beginning of a new wave of remediation centering on events arranged by a relatively unknown situationist, Jørgen Nash, who kept the migrating tale in motion when he declared himself guilty of "mermaid murder" in 1998. While the extensive media attention this case received was central to the way in which events subsequently unfolded, it is debatable whether or not Nash is correct in

1. See *Fyens Stiftstidende* and *Politiken*, August 17, 2003.



The Little Mermaid, defaced

claiming that these events rekindled interest in Andersen's fairytale. A quick glance at the many tourist shots taken daily of the mermaid on Langelinje, the related tourist merchandise available, and the "mermaid murder" suggest, rather, that these phenomena represent different forms of dilution—the breakdown of tradition—from the perspective of Andersen's text and are an expression of the fact that the mermaid is now living in a modern, industrialized folk culture.

From the perspective of historical consciousness, the long chain of references that have defined the mermaid as a locus of cultural meaning, can be divided into three layers: 1) the feudal-popular-pagan traditional culture with its superstitious sailors and folk ballads with sea creatures, 2) the bourgeois-Christian culture to which both Andersen's fairytale and Eriksen's statue at Copenhagen's harbor belong, and 3) finally, mass culture with its multi-media exploitation of Andersen's fairytale, the most characteristic example of which is Disney's postmodern musical animated film. The issues, then, are 1) To what does each of the three layers refer, 2) Which *tertium comparationis* makes each individual reference possible, and 3) Do these three different layers refer to each other to form an interwoven complex of meanings? Given the scope of the



present article, it is not possible to examine these problems—problems that have been central to the humanities since the first transfer of traditions at the library in Alexandria. The problem evades answers as well because we cannot escape the necessity of using ourselves as a standard when we assume possession of other cultural traditions. This procession necessarily involves transformation. What follows, will focus on one such transfer/transformation in an attempt to analyze Andersen's fairytale and its remediation in Disney's film.

### ANDERSEN'S MERMAID

#### *Space and Setting*

The space of this fairytale is highly economic in its construction. Vertically, it is organized through an opposition between up and down, sky and seabed. Between these two, there lies a third level that is organized horizontally through an opposition between sea surface and dry land. The story takes place here. Customarily the mermaid lures sailors downwards from the land to the sea, but the Little Mermaid, in contrast, strives with her good deeds to achieve immortality.

The story is a frame narrative as is clear in the introduction, in which the listeners are transported from the moment of storytelling in the sitting room far out to sea where the actual events take place, and from there, down to the bottom of the ocean. The embedded nature of the central story in the frame is also thematized when the narrator describes plants and creatures from the deep as phenomena from contemporary daily life. In so doing, features of contemporary life are imparted to the merpeople. These attributions are discrete, and they are well-known from other fairytales by Andersen. This move differs from most of the others since here the scene is placed within the frame. In the final paragraph, the characters are the *Luftens Døtre* [Daughters of the Air], whom the little mermaid has joined and whose good deeds and hopes for an eternal life are projections from the ground. What is up and what is down are, thus, determined from there.

The daughters of the air keep watch from above and turn those children listening to the story into participants in the emancipation process that the daughters must undergo. When the children behave well toward their parents, the daughters' trial period is shortened, but

misbehavior extends it. This kind of involvement of the audience is reminiscent of a modern computer game in which the player is able to choose his or her own way through the plot. This resemblance is only superficial, however, since the key is ethical behavior in the bosom of one's family rather than cost-free choices in a fictional universe.

Many regard the finale as an after-the-fact moral appendage, however, both the gradual revelation of the tale's frame and the genesis of the tale dispute this view. During its composition, the author referred to the text as "Havets Døttre" [The Daughters of the Sea]. Prior to this, a friend referred to the text as "Luftens Døttre" (7:37) ["The Daughters of the Air"] in a letter to Andersen thus suggesting that this part of the text served as a point of departure. Another argument in favor of interpreting the final paragraph as an organic part of the text is that the surprise ending of the main story—the mermaid's ascent to the ethereal sphere and with it the possibility of obtaining an immortal soul—is overshadowed by the fact that the children listening to the narrative are the true agents in this sphere of Christian morality. What child would not want to be on his best behavior if it would put an end to the heroine's sufferings in the bedtime story papa just read and laid on the table next to the bed?

With its focus on the children's behavior, this interactive fairytale is similar to the surveillance texts typical of children's literature before the breakthrough of which Andersen was a part.<sup>2</sup> The novelty of this focus lies, as it does in the mermaid story, in the tale's regulation of behavior through internal control. Presumptuous children are not corporally punished by a distant, severe father (deity), but learn instead to feel sorrow and shame as well as a sense of responsibility for ensuring that innocent representatives of goodness are not punished.

Many have argued that the prince is the main character of the tale.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, he is at the center of human longing for incorporation into the strange, fertile sea that is the background of much of the tale about this most human figure, at once a mermaid, a girl, and a child. The longing that she feels, however, is more deeply justified because it results in personality development the moment the knife strikes the surface

2. See Inger Simonsen, *Den danske Børnebog i det 19. Aarhundrede*, 42 ff. On surveillance literature, see Philippe Ariès, *Barndommens historie*, Paris 1960, trans. 1982.

3. For further discussion on this topic see Finn Barlby, *Det dobbelte liv: Om H.C. Andersen*, 69 ff.



of the water. The prince is left longing but self-reflective. He is neither able to act nor develop as a character and, therefore, cannot accomplish the task assigned to the children in the frame story: to give others an "eternal soul" through love. This fact is conveyed most concretely in terms of the children's responsibility to love and obey their parents, who are represented by the daughters of the air in the tale. Parents in turn are actively involved in reading the tale aloud to their children.

The child's solicitous love for parents replaces the mermaid's awakening consciousness of her sexual drives as the key to the divine. The main story presents a broken nuclear family at the bottom of the sea, but children are given a divine power for controlling the demons of the sea. Instead of transporting its listeners to the realm of superstition, this fairytale transforms them into participants in the fiction, reinterprets demonic nature, and thus returns them to their real lives for the choice between good and evil—smiles and tears.

### *Soul and Gender*

The story of the Little Mermaid follows the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, both in terms of its framing and narration: it moves from (1) childhood in the family via (2) the quandaries of youth—the discovery of humans—"the other nature"—to (3) a mature actualization of self among the *Luftens Døtre*. It begins and ends happily, but, as usual, the story focuses on an intervening schism. In this case, the shifts between the sky and the sea are duplicated in the relationship between the dry land and the bottom of the sea as well as the ruptures between good and evil that produce the moments of mistaken identity and gory scenes found in late-romantic opera.

Early on, Andersen's contemporary, the Danish author Carsten Hauch, wondered at the little creature's ability to follow her own instincts toward the good so purposefully without already possessing the eternal soul for which she so yearned.<sup>4</sup> Had she lacked this drive, however, the story would have been about the demonic. In this case, it deals with the relationship between the temporal and the eternal in a process of development necessary for taking possession of oneself. Luther and the children's literature that dominated the period up until

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4. See Hauch's letter to Ludvig Bødtker, dated May 22, 1837 cited in *H.C. Andersens Eventyr*, 6:134-5.

pre-romanticism did not attribute an innately divine soul to the child. Instead, the child acquired one and became human once its wild nature had been disciplined. Both Kierkegaard and Andersen moved beyond this point. The mermaid is not human, but both she and children in general are assumed to possess the instinct to do good from the very beginning. Indeed, an upbringing based on internal control would not be possible otherwise.

The mermaid comes from a family sphere that excludes sexuality. Her father is a widower. His mother fills in for the absent mother in the role of the good mother, but she knows more about the life of humans than she reveals to her grandchildren. This fact is made particularly clear in their encounter with the unfamiliar as they also discover their own sexual identity. She is especially adept at both repressing and driving out what she finds undesirable. She brings the girls face to face with the opposition between the surface of the sea and dry land—the site of the action—so that they will choose, as she did, to remain true to their own fundamental nature. They inherit a comfortable and happy life of three hundred years but no immortal soul. The youngest of the girls is the exception. From the beginning, her longing makes her different, and she attempts to obtain an eternal soul through the realization of her love for a human being. A Faust in reverse, she must sell half of her body as well as her voice to the sea witch, whose appearance, stronghold, and underwater servants identify her as the character into whom the sum of underwater sexuality has been driven—in particular masculine sexuality, if we are to give credence to the phallic nature of the symbols surrounding her. The description of the sea witch ought to please every Freudian, who can accordingly and reasonably ponder the extent to which she is the embodiment of the masculine force in the story and the demonic helper who exceeds the demonic, a feat of which neither the sea king nor the land prince is capable.

The process is irreversible, and the terms harsh: in order to obtain her eternal soul, the prince must be so in love with her that he forgets both his father and his mother and marries the little mermaid. This degree of commitment is not only a substantial, but also the narrative's overarching theme. As everyone knows, the project fails. Despite his intuitive love for the one that saved him, the prince sees her as his "little foundling" and does not understand the very limited language left to her.

She strives for both the red and the white. Here the use of color symbolism is but one of the very effective narrative devices. After the little mermaid's sisters in a gesture of self-castration offer the sea witch their glorious hair in exchange for a knife with which their little sister can re-enter the fold, she turns the water red, not by plunging the knife into the heart of the newly-wed prince, but by directing the weapon at herself so that the drops of blood trickle back into the sea. Liberation lies in this self-sacrifice. Her reaction to her situation has been like that of a man in using the phallic knife, an instinctive act in which the body (again) is offered on behalf of the spirit. Like a reverse Aphrodite, her body dissolves into white foam, and she is united with those "hundrede gjennemsigtige, deilige Skabninger" [hundreds of transparent, beautiful beings] floating in the air, who are invisible to humans: "deres Stemme var Melodie, men saa aandig, at intet menneskeligt Øre Kunde høre den" [their voice was melodious, but so ethereal that no human ear was able to hear it] (1:105).

As is often the case in Andersen's tales, the Little Mermaid as an embodiment of righteousness receives yet another chance: the group of sisters living in the sea for three hundred years of familial comfort is replaced with another group for whom a trial period of three hundred years awaits. This reduplication is clearly an example of deferred gratification—with a vengeance or as an exemplification of the Protestant work ethic as outlined by Max Weber. The children of the air and those in the living room are only able to communicate through good deeds so one presumes that the trial period is not yet over. Andersen's text is, thus, a *Bildungsroman* about the mermaid embedded in a story about conduct addressed to children of the author's day.

The demons are put into words and can then be countered with actions that simultaneously reduce religion to ethics just as sexuality is removed from love. Consequently, virtue and love for one's parents are able to stand guard together over home life as abstract instantiations of actual parental supervision. In the process, Andersen certainly shows exceptional daring and bravery in his fascinating account of sexual longing that finds expression during the child's meeting with itself as an adult. Readers have seen enough within and between the lines to grasp how much remains implicit and why. By land, by sea, and by air.



## DISNEY'S MERMAID

Children's culture has long been a part of mass culture, both when it was predominantly religious and later under the influence of market forces. It is therefore not surprising that Disney—the most powerful influence on the international market for children's culture—adapted *The Little Mermaid* for a global audience. It is an arresting example of an act of remediation with explicit reference to Andersen's text, which is just as ill protected against reinterpretation and distortion as the folk tradition was when Andersen seized upon it. Although I certainly deem it important to evaluate the film on its own artistic and commercial premises, I must here limit myself to an examination of the film's reconstitution of Andersen's fairytale.

Awaited with great expectations, Disney's film arrived in Denmark in the fall of 1990 and was launched with every means available to the modern media industry. It was to be Disney's great comeback to the animated musical film. The firm had already supplied a number of brilliant examples of this genre as early as the beginning of the 1930s, and with *Snow White* in 1937, Disney enjoyed unprecedented artistic and economic success. Andersen's work had already been the subject of an earlier Disney film, *The Ugly Duckling* (1939), and after a series of lean years, the American version of *The Little Mermaid* more than fulfilled artistic expectations in receiving Oscars for best music and best song. The Danish version of the film was dubbed using the voices and singing talents of eminent domestic artists.

The publicity campaign was set in motion before the film appeared on the screen so children would persuade their parents to purchase posters, records, erasers, pencils, action figures, and burgers at McDonald's—all in the name of the Mermaid. Subsequently, these same adults could also invest a tidy sum in collectors' pictures taken from the film. In order to convince as many people as possible to purchase more pictures, the collectors' album itself was extremely inexpensive. The film became the central component, which informed the use of the promotional products. The product line developed around *The Little Mermaid* is similar to that of the *Ninja Turtles* or *Transformers*, which also appeal to children through the collective efforts of commercials, television, and the toy industry. This hard-driving commercialism could be one of the reasons why serious cultural critics and parents in Denmark turned away since they were not accustomed to seeing a film as the center of

an all-encompassing commercial campaign. However, precisely this concept has characterized Disney and the Disney Group since the mid-1930s. This strategy was the reason that he, inspired by Tivoli among other things and ignoring opposition among top Disney management, proceeded in 1955 to create Disneyland in the Los Angeles suburb of Anaheim. Here, children would be able to participate in every dimension of Disney's world.

The Danish newspapers dutifully participated in the promotion of *The Little Mermaid*. Since reviewers paid little attention to the financial aspects of the project, they offered two pieces of advice to readers: 1) forget Andersen and 2) enjoy the film with your children as an impressive artistic experience in its own right. Both pieces of advice are rather beside the point. Although the fairytale is radically reinterpreted, Disney nonetheless expresses something Andersonian. And although the film is an arresting work of art in many respects, it has nonetheless been misunderstood as addressing both parents and their children.<sup>5</sup>

In the film, the Little Mermaid is transformed into a terrestrial figure, i.e. she is from the beginning associated clearly with the land more than the sea. In part, this shift in focus results from her human experience, which appears quite lively on the bottom of the ocean, but the transcendental and religious dimensions of the fairytale are notably absent. In part, too, the world view and the devices used in the film are clearly grounded in the contemporary American cultural industry. The message of the fairytale is conveyed in terms suitable for a modern public but is integrated into a product that cheats its intended public of small children by making the daughter's emancipation from puberty into the turning point of the story and offering parents the advice to allow their children more freedom.

Similar to other Disney films, it invokes a series of stories alongside the fairytale. These are not joined in a single well-balanced narrative, but instead intrude like loose fragments that are not taken seriously on their own but are free-floating, manipulable quotations. If they collectively point toward anything, it must be the film maker's—or

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5. It is only possible to summarize at this point the more general conclusions drawn from a detailed analysis of the film. For a complete analysis, see my article "Disneyfication—den lille oversøiske havfrue" in *At se teksten: Essays om tekst og billede*. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1993.

our own—expectations about postmodernity. It is open to discussion, then, whether the film represents a new tradition that fulfills in a real sense the romantic period's expectations regarding the free work of art or whether it merely feeds our confusion. If the film is meant to help resolve the indeterminate position of children in the media age, it could have taken these children as its starting point instead of merely handing them sporadic, momentary experiences. As is customary in the media industry, Disney films usually gift-wraps their product in sexuality as watered-down Freudian clichés. Even this is not done consistently, however, since the sexual instinct is toned down in the film version of the story.

In Denmark, the film was not on the billboards for long whereas it became a genuine success in the U.S. precisely because it gave American girls an opportunity to continue playing the mermaid. A line of mermaid costumes was launched after the film, and the Walt Disney group produced a sequel with the sub-title, *Return to the Sea*. In this sequel, the mermaid and the prince are now married, and we follow their daughter, Melody, who is drawn to the sea without understanding the danger represented by the sea witch, Morgana. If Morgana gets hold of Melody, however, she will gain control over the seven seas.

### THE MERMAID AS ICON

An icon is a picture, a statue, or more specifically an image of a saint. A distinction is made between the fabricated signifier and the person, object, or idea that is signified. It is a special referentiality of a canvas to a face, for instance, that also assumes a *tertium comparationis*—a common point of resemblance—that makes such a comparison possible. For example, in what ways does the two-dimensional, black-and-white picture resemble the three-dimensional living face with its full spectrum of colors? In general, iconography deals with what pictures mean and in particular with what portraits and statues mean. In a more narrow sense, iconography deals with the attributes and symbols used to depict gods, heroes, and saints. As one sees, there are a number of similarities between the two definitions, and an analysis of *The Little Mermaid* quite easily spans both definitions. In this final section, however, I refer to the narrower definition of iconography, since the figure of the little mermaid shares many features with the female saint.



H.C. Andersen's mermaid can be understood as a siren in reverse. Instead of seducing human beings, she wishes to live as a one herself—is seduced by them, in fact. At the same time, life as a human being is first and foremost a means to eternal life. She wishes, through love, to surpass finitude and temporality and to achieve eternity. Human life is a mode of existence that makes it possible to connect the animal and the divine. The *tertium comparationis* is love, which, seen from an animal perspective amounts to sexual drive, the loss of virginity, and the experience of guilt. From the perspective of the divine, love amounts to both self-sacrifice and good deeds. Seen in this context, the mermaid with her seductive powers is neither frightening to people, nor is she seduced by them into becoming foreign to her nature. She is already human, and in her bifurcated body—half human, half animal—she exhibits the human split between the supernal divine and the all too human. Søren Kierkegaard described Christianity as belief in the absurd—in the paradox he calls God-Man, or Jesus, who is the God in time and who is found in the moment, the atom of eternity, in which temporality and eternity cross each other.<sup>6</sup>

The mermaid is not Jesus, however. After her childhood at the bottom of the sea, she desires to ascend by virtue of her actions in the sea and on land to the ethereal sphere in order to prepare together with her sisters for an eternal life. If she were a saint, she may well belong among the highest order of saints of the Catholic Church: those who were martyred for their faith. It is the martyrs, in particular, who, like the mermaid, have separated body from mind. In the legends about them, descriptions of the instruments of their torture play an important role, not unlike that of the knife in Andersen's fairy tale. The text is, in any case, rather more Catholic than Kierkegaard would have liked. In his chief work on the relationship between ethics and religion, *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* [*Works of Love*],<sup>7</sup> 1847, Kierkegaard opposes human love, which ascends like the mermaid to the earth's surface with Christian love, which descends. The Gospel According to Saint John offers a

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Begrebet Angest* in *Samlede Verker*, 6: 170–80.

7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Verker* 12: 168.

similar view of the spatial realities of human and divine love: "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (3:13).

The separation between the divine and the human is often perceived as the division between the divine and the animal within human beings. Since ancient times, creatures have been imagined with bodies comprised of various natural parts that have been recombined supernaturally. For instance, a griffin is a winged animal with the head of a raptor and the body of a carnivore. Among this colorful assembly of composite creatures—the basilisk, chimera, dragon, unicorn, merman, hydra, centaur, cyclops, medusa, roc, satyr, sphinx, vampire, and werewolf—there are some that are different from the rest in that they combine a human body with that of an animal. For example, the sphinx is often attributed with wings, a human head, and a lion's body. The Egyptian and west Asian traditions associated with this awe-inspiring monster subsequently merged with the local legends of ancient Greece, which explains why the sphinx occupies a considerable roll in the Theban cycle of legends and in the Oedipus tragedies.

In Greek folklore, sirens belong to this category of supernatural creatures. Their female face and bird's body lure sailors toward the shore causing them to run aground. Homer recounts how the hero Odysseus allows himself to be bound to the mast during his homeward journey in order to avoid being seduced by the sirens. Presumably, the original source behind the Greek belief in mermaids is the sea cow, a member of the mammalian order Sirenia, which are sea mammals related to the elephant. During the nursing period, these animals develop full breasts in their armpits, and with their rudimentary hind limbs, they can appear as nature's own bifurcated body with the upper body of a hoofed animal and the lower body of a fish or a whale. Since they come very close to the shore to feed on eelgrass and other plants and are often more than three meters long, it is very likely that these sirens were the object of sailors' attention and terror.<sup>8</sup>

If our need to create meaning leads to the construction of divine creatures that are at once human and superhuman, then it is plausible

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8. There is a difference between the manatee, which lives along the tropical coasts on both sides of the Atlantic and up the rivers, and the dugong, which lives in the ocean between India and Australia. A larger species, the Steller's sea cow, became extinct during the 1700s.

to imagine that we also have a need to explore human nature, particularly our own drives, and we do so when we see such drives reflected in the qualities found in or attributed to animals. The animal in humans is understood as the human in animals, not least in modern society in which projections of specific human characteristics have been rerouted from paganism's divine relatives and Catholicism's saints to those animals that we associate with ourselves and worship as modern idols. Mermaids are not holy creatures that parallel cows in India or dogs in the West. Originally derived from sightings of the sea cow, these creatures were the subsequent imaginative constructions of these encounters, constructions whose beginnings can be found in the human need to understand sexuality and love.



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